Administrative History for History and Administration

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Many National Park Service sites preserve and interpret important aspects of American history. Native American ruins and ceremonial sites, explorers' pathways and inscriptions, frontier posts, industrial and transport centers, examples of agricultural development, and a plethora of battlefields, memorials, and forts compose nearly three-fifths of the park system's units. Most parks and monuments devoted primarily to preserving natural phenomena also take time and space to interpret the human history of their areas. Additionally, the Park Service administers the national historic preservation program which has identified thousands of structures and sites for acknowledgement and protection.

Yet there is one type of history—administrative history—in which it continues to lag behind these other efforts. Like most agencies, the Park Service often seems unaware that its actions are making history and that this history is critical to the nation and its culture. How many superintendents of parks or, for that matter, historic sites and monuments staffed by professional historians, file annual reports adequately recording activities affecting the preservation and administration of their areas?

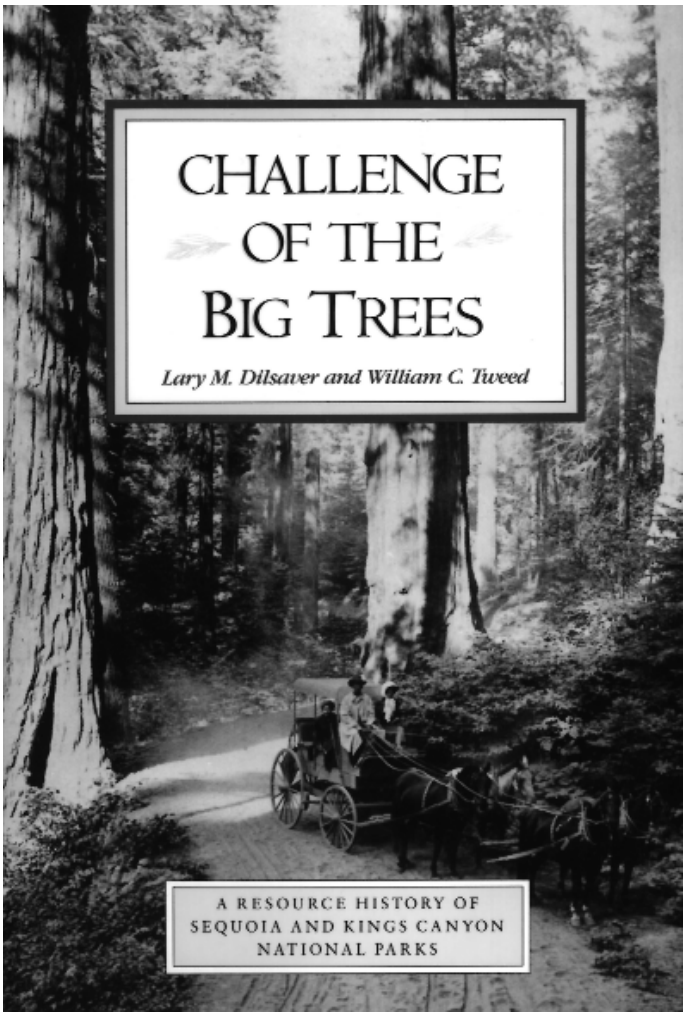
The Park Service has in recent years given far more attention to its administrative history than in the past—an encouraging trend. Yet there is a very long way to go before an adequate understanding of the agency, its various units, and thus the preservation movement in America can be fully outlined. The Park Service, as the principal preservation agency of the federal government, and its charges require far more research than is currently being done or contemplated. The conservation and preservation movements compose one of the fundamental American cultural stories of the 20th century. It is time to move beyond the generalized or polemic literature that has characterized most related scholarship to date and seek answers to questions both deeper and more specific.

Such administrative historical research also provides guidelines for current and future park management. If there is one lesson to be learned in researching the NPS, it is that traditions, especially traditional uses of resources, seem inviolate in park management. But how did these uses come about and how were they managed in the past? How did the knotty problems of over-visitation, inappropriate resource use, and peculiar development geography evolve? What was behind the policies we question and argue about today when they were established? Understanding where we have been, in as much detail and with as much objectivity as possible, can give much-needed perspective on the future.

Three projects on which I have worked or am working will illustrate some of the potential opportunities and benefits of administrative history: a history of a particular park and its management; a document collection for reference; and a study of a particular problem of management aimed at creating a model of NPS behavior.

My first research on national parks came about for thoroughly non-academic reasons. I loved camping and hiking in Sequoia and Kings Canyon and yearned for a way to direct my research and field work there. The opportunity came with a call by NPS historian Barry Mackintosh for assistance from the academic community in compiling administrative histories of parks. I responded and shortly found myself discussing preservation and management issues with park historian Bill Tweed. What began as a relatively simple project on resource management of an example sequoia grove (Giant Forest) and a case study of the back country (the Rae Lakes Loop) quickly snowballed into a complete overview of the parks' formation, expansion, protection, and preservation.

There were many intertwined stories, often of critical national import, in these two old parks. As the stories became more and more labyrinthine, the potential benefit of their telling became more and more obvious. In the end Bill joined me in producing *Challenge of the Big Trees: A Resource History of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks,* published by the Sequoia Natural History Association in 1990. This centennial history might be seen as a typical celebratory chronicle of two successful and much-loved parks. In reality, however, it is a history of a



piece of land in the southern Sierra Nevada and the environmental changes that have befallen it.

Among the important findings published in the volume were (1) the full history of efforts to remove the concessioner from Giant Forest dating back not to the 1960s as was supposed, but to 1927; (2) the complex and politically explosive events surrounding creation of Kings Canyon National Park; (3) the interagency antagonism that characterized the entire existence of the two parks; (4) the importance of these two parks as trial grounds for national policies; (5) the remarkable influence of certain superintendents and outside groups (notably the Sierra Club) in formulating policy; and (6) the give-and-take between local park officials and the Washington Office in policy-making which often resulted in compromise actions reflecting both camps' ideas. All of these findings and more are useful for interpretation and resource management in the parks today, while from an academic standpoint they help explain the development of the agency and its national mandate.

Visitor congestion at Giant Forest, Sequoia National Park, 1947.

Many major parks, including such obvious units as Great Smoky Mountains and Everglades, have no appreciable written histories. For those who would follow this interesting path I would offer these recommendations: (1) Assume that most administrators were doing what they thought best. It has become chic these days to blast former officials as weak, evil, or stupid in carrying out their duties. This is both unfair and bad history. At least one historian has suggested that the past is a foreign country. Let us try not to be ethnocentric. (2) Mine the park's correspondence files and, to the degree possible, work inductively. (3) Encourage park management to be careful what files are destroyed and to submit good annual reports of park issues and management.

The second project upon which I have embarked is a compilation to be called "Critical Documents of the National Park System." At present I have identified some 76 laws, letters, policy statements, studies, and articles that have shaped the park system and its management or that express management attitudes and ideas at various times. Some documents are obvious—the Leopold Report, the Yellowstone Act, the National Park Service Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act, to mention a few. Others are less obvious—the minutes of Director Wirth's Mission 66 presentation to Eisenhower's cabinet, a 1936 article by Superintendent John White of Sequoia National Park on the proper atmosphere a park should have, and a 1912 discussion of automobile use in parks.

The purpose of such a volume of documents is to provide the exact wording of pivotal policy statements and to clearly demonstrate, through their own words, the attitudes of past management officials. For current and future NPS officials, these documents can provide perspective on past decisions and current policies. For academic researchers, they can provide windows to past actions and give handy access to some otherwise obscure passages. This collection has come about in part from my own research but also with contributions from some 25 NPS personnel to whom I have turned for help and from whom I have received much encouragement.

The final project is still in the developmental stages. During my work at Sequoia and subsequently at Yosemite, Muir Woods, and Channel Islands, the problem of overcrowding and visitor impact repeatedly arose. I discovered that the severity of impact necessary to elicit an official response and the type of measures that evolved to cope with the impact varied in each park. Based on this preliminary research, I propose to study NPS response to overcrowding in a dozen more popular parks (Shenandoah, Acadia, Grand Canyon, Rocky Mountain, to name a few) and to construct a model of response sequence and technique. In particular, I wish to see what conditions force a shift from indirect controls (in which the visitor does not realize controls are being exerted, such as a decision to build no more visitor accommodations) to direct controls (off-limits areas, infrastructure removal, etc.). I hope this project will help lead to a coordinated response to overcrowding and a system-wide reappraisal of the 1916 charge to provide for the enjoyment of the parks.

These three projects are quite different in scope, but all have the dual purposes of fostering better understanding of the preservation movement and better park management. They are small scratches on a very big surface. There are hundreds of park units to be studied and thousands of individual questions to be plumbed before we can confidently claim to know our park system. And all the time history continues to be made. We can only hope that park officials see their way clear to save more evidence of this history.

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